

# Keeping the Issues Alive

## Heart of the Pentagon Papers

Reviewed by  
Laurence Stern

### Books

The reviewer is an assistant managing editor of The Washington Post and was chief of its Indochina Bureau during 1970.

#### WASHINGTON PLANS AN AGGRESSIVE WAR.

By Ralph Stavins, Richard J. Barnet and  
Marcus G. Raskin.

(Random House, 374 pp., \$7.95; Vintage paperback edition, \$1.95)

Here is another book that has, to a large extent, been overtaken by events. Although the authors had their hands on the secret Pentagon study well ahead of the New York Times, their book was not in the stores until almost three months after the documents were available at neighborhood newsstands at a dime a day.

Yet this does not invalidate the book. The substance of the Pentagon documents has been relegated in the daily press to the status of last week's street mugging. We read from time to time about grand jury deliberations in Boston and Los Angeles. The controversy over the administration's efforts to keep the Pentagon Papers out of the papers eclipsed the importance of the documents themselves.

Yet the disclosures about the inner workings of the national security system in managing the war are at the heart of the Pentagon Papers affair. I find it difficult to accept the notion that it was all old hat. What the documents told us about the methods, the mentality, the practical wisdom of the national security managers was never so clearly etched in public view.

One of the virtues of this three-part book is that it addresses itself to the pre-eminent issue of the Pentagon Papers revelation: that vast power that has been invested in a small circle of governmental mandarins to crank up a war for which little public consensus had been obtained and for which there is no immediate issue of national survival.

Richard J. Barnet talks to this point in an essay that is by far the most rewarding contribution of "Washington Plans an Aggressive War."

His subject is the national security bureaucracy that has its headquarters in the White House cellar and stretches its ganglia into the military, diplomatic and intelligence communities of Washington. The chief officer is the Special Assistant for National Security affairs. He is the President's ultimate filter on international affairs as they impinge upon what the security managers define to be in the national interest.

The stylistic hallmarks of the national security management game are toughness, positiveness, pragmatism. These were the cardinal, manly virtues in the New Frontier days, when the next great leap forward was made in our commitment to the Vietnam war.

The face of McGeorge Bundy, perhaps the epitome of the breed, projects itself on the mind's screen an ice sculpture.

But as Barnet argues, and as the sad history of this period confirms, these brilliant and hard-nosed mandarins were as susceptible to the narcosis of stereotype and myth as the most woolly-headed among us. Even worse, they were mesmerized by the incoming stream of self-justifying cables and memoranda that tended to legitimize the policies of

whichever administration was in power.

It is a truism of most bureaucracies that personal advancement rarely hinges on the purveying of bad news and dissenting opinions. In the case of the Vietnam war there was little room in the top councils of government for nay-sayers.

"The pervasive ignorance of the national security managers," writes Barnet, "concerning the politics of Vietnam led them into the trap of collecting isolated facts and figures . . . Like the classic private eye on television, homo mathematicus always looks for 'the facts.' In the process, he misses reality, for he never gets close enough or related enough to another society to do more than count things in it."

The Pentagon documents will serve as the fossil marks of government process in dealing with the imagined threat to American power of a tiny Southeast Asian nation. What a pity if they should teach us nothing for the present and the future.

The virtue of this book is that it keeps the issues alive in what we fondly call public consciousness.